ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE
for the
Mount Haggin Forest Management Project

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 3, Bozeman
May 2012

Preface

Mount Haggin WMA supports a significant amount of year-round recreational usage on the Big Hole side of the WMA including campers, trail riders, and wildlife watchers in the summer, hunters in the fall, and skiers and snowmobilers in the winter. Approximately 40 miles of primitive roads allow for motorized access throughout the WMA. Cross-country ski trails, developed on the WMA in 1985 using old logging roads, support approximately 3,000 skier days annually. Much of the road and trail miles occur within forested areas.

Due to the significant outbreak of mountain pine beetle throughout southwest Montana over the last six years, there are large tracts of dead and dying lodgepole pine throughout Mount Haggin WMA. They create a potential hazard to human safety should they fall along roads and trails. This project proposes to preemptively remove standing dead and green beetle-infested lodgepole pine trees from roadsides and ski trails to minimize human safety risk.

Additional areas have been identified where tree removal can be logistically and ecologically expanded to include merchantable standing dead and green beetle-infested lodgepole pine in order to defray implementation cost of the project. Funds generated from this commercial timber will pay for noncommercial tree removal, improvements on primitive logging roads, and weed treatment in affected areas. Additional funds would be applied to other maintenance and habitat projects on the WMA such as fence removal, erosion control, and interpretative signs.

Proposed Action

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to remove standing dead and green beetle-infested lodgepole pine from select areas on Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in order to reduce road- and trailside hazard trees. Merchantable dead and dying timber will be removed from certain expanded road- and trailside units in order to cover costs of the project including removal of noncommercial trees, road improvements, and weed control. Funds generated in excess of project costs will be applied to several maintenance and habitat projects on the WMA such as fence removal, erosion control, and interpretative signs. The proposed action would remove dead and beetle-infested hazard trees on either side of 4.8 miles of road and over 8 miles of ski trails. An additional 800 acres in 16 expanded road-trailside units in close proximity to these roads and trails would also have a portion of the dead and beetle infested lodgepole pine removed. No new roads would be constructed.

Public Process and Comments

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on April 3, 2012.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 25 days (through April 27, 2012). Legal notices were printed in the *Montana Standard* (Butte) and the *Anaconda Leader*. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: http://fwp.mt.gov//publicnotices/.

Eight individuals submitted comments; two of those were on behalf of groups, two were on behalf of local businesses, two represented themselves only, one represented the owners of patented mining claims located on the WMA, and one was from Deer Lodge County Commissioners. All eight responders were in support of the proposed action.

Below is a summary of the comments and questions received and FWP responses to them:

1. The owners of the patented mining claims, located within the California Creek and Ski Trail project areas, requested that no trees be cut on their property and that they be notified ahead of time if logs need to be hauled across their property.

   FWP response: The project proposal does not include harvest on these privately held mining claims, and necessary precautions will be taken on the ground to ensure that harvest does not occur here. FWP will work with the landowners to make satisfactory arrangements for hauling logs across a portion of the mining claim located within the Ski Trail project area.

2. Consider changing the harvest targets from 'dead and infested lodgepole pine' to 'high risk' trees, which would include lodgepole pine trees 7" diameter-at-breast-height (DBH) and larger that are highly susceptible to mountain pine beetle.

   FWP response: The majority of those lodgepole pine as described in the comment fit the proposed criteria of 'dead and infested,' based on field observations of the trees within the described units as proposed, and therefore are one and the same with the commenter's recommendation.

3. The area surrounding the project areas receive high recreational use during both the summer and fall. Recommend that logging operations occur as quickly as possible and be suspended during bird, moose, archery and general hunting seasons, if need be.

   FWP response: FWP will be mindful of the disturbance that this project may cause to hunters and other recreationists, since the area where the project is to occur is heavily used during the summer recreation and fall hunting season, and will make changes as warranted. It is intended that this project begin in July and proceed steadily until logging is completed or until snow shuts the operation down, whichever is first. Disturbance should be localized and minimal over the entire WMA as work will be focused in one area at a time.

4. Where logging is to occur in close proximity to riparian areas, precautions should be taken to limit the disturbance to these areas.

   FWP response: Strict adherence to Montana's Streamside Management Zone (SMZ) law will reduce potential impacts to water quality, riparian habitat, and help prevent increased sediment flows to creeks in the project area. Mechanized logging equipment will not be permitted within SMZs. The only hazard trees that will be removed within SMZs are those that could fall directly on a trail or road.

5. Leave all trees at drainage crossings to provide cover for elk crossing roads.

   FWP response: There are areas within the proposed project areas and cutting units where the Roadside Hazard Tree Removal prescription will be applied, i.e. remove all dead and infested lodgepole pine trees within a 75' or 200' buffer on either side of road or trail. Removing these trees, however, should have minimal disturbance on elk movement in the area given the relatively small acreage that will be impacted by this project compared to the entire WMA.

6. Pile slash and burn following timber harvest. Provide firewood available to the public at no cost at the site.

   FWP response: Slash will be piled at landings and burned sometime after completion of the project when conditions are appropriate. A portion of the slash will be sold to commercial firewood buyers to generate income for project expenses and additional projects on the WMA. The public will be allowed to remove personal firewood from the remaining pile afterward and before the slash is burned.

7. Establish photo points to monitor regeneration following logging.

   FWP response: This is a good idea. The local FWP biologist will follow up on this.

8. Recommend not using herbicide to treat weeds as they destroy the existing forb and shrub communities important for wildlife.

   FWP response: FWP recognizes that there are several tools available for weed treatments, with herbicide being one of them, along with biological controls, mechanical removal, etc. Weed treatment will adhere to the guidance of FWP's Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan (2008).

9. FWP should examine the final report from the 15-year Montana Cooperative Elk/Logging Study.

   FWP response: While the draft Environmental Assessment did not make mention of it, the author of the document did consult the Montana Cooperative Elk-Logging Study (1985) but failed to reference it. Several aspects of the project proposal stem directly from recommendations made in the book: 1) dispose of right-of-way slash; 2) avoid moist sites; and 3) avoid winter range. The reference for this book is given below.

In addition to those comments and recommendations received by the public, FWP has made the following minor adjustments on page 12 of the EA:

> 4.1 Description of Relevant Affected Resources
>
> *4.1.1* Soil & Geologic
>
> *Predicted Consequences of Alternative A*
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> Timber removal is expected to occur during the summer and into fall when the ground is primarily free of snow. The ground, without the protective snow layer, will be susceptible to the establishment of new erosion patterns and compactions. A short-term effect caused by the use of mechanical equipment to cut and transport trees to landings may lead to some soil instability. Ground disturbance will be mitigated by utilizing existing roads, careful planning of skid trail locations, limiting cutting to slopes of 40% or less,

avoiding wet areas, utilizing appropriate logging systems, using rubber-tired skidders, and avoiding areas with thin and sensitive soils. There will be no short- or long-term effects on the overall geologic substrate.

Literature Cited

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan, 2008.

Lyon, L.J., T.N. Lonner, J.P. Weigand, C.L. Marcum, W.D. Edge, J.D. Jones, D.W McCleerey, and L.L. Hicks. 1985. Coordinating elk and timber management. Final report of the Montana cooperative elk-logging study 1970-1985. Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks, Bozeman.

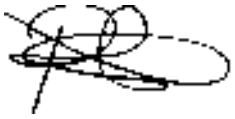
Final Environmental Assessment

Slight modifications to the Draft Environmental Assessment have been made based on public comment. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, it is my decision to approve the proposed action for implementation of the Mount Haggin WMA Forest Management project.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



May 7, 2012

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Patrick J. Flowers Date
Region 3 Supervisor